



obama

and the principle of equality



On 4 July 1776 the thirteen British colonies decided to sever ties with Britain. Those that fought against the king of England had precisely in mind what kind of nation they wanted to found. These memorable words in the Declaration of Independence say it all: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.' In other words, in the United States of America the principle of equality would be a guiding star for government and in society. Consequently, there would be no room for an aristocratic class based on the hereditary principle such as existed in Europe. No privileges based on bloodline. The reins of state would not be passed down from one generation to another. No, the rulers of the new nation would derive their just powers from the consent of the people. Unfortunately, America has not always honored this fundamental idea that all men are equal.

Grounds of exclusion

The first group of settlers in the United States had a common background. They came from the North Western part of Europe and were of Protestant stock. They were classified as White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP). After the WASP's were in America for some generations many others crossed the oceans, came to American shores seeking a better life for themselves and their children. They came from different parts of Europe bringing different customs and their religions. These groups were initially not accepted by the East coast social aristocracy. They were not deemed of the right pedigree and were therefore confined to the margins of American life. In American history the discrimination of the Irish is well-documented. During the second half of the 19th century millions of Irish

said goodbye to poverty and try to avail themselves of the opportunities the New World offered. The Irish started out at the bottom of society. The men found jobs in the harbors while as the women worked as domestics in the homes of the affluent. For the East coast establishment America was a Protestant nation. The Irish professed the Roman Catholic faith. Their low socioeconomic status and their religion were grounds of exclusion. Thanks to unionism, local politics and the Catholic school system many young Irish where able to climb the ladder. Second and especially third generation Irish exchanged life in the inner cities and moved into suburbs. Because of the progress they made as a group the Irish were -reluctantly- accepted by their Protestant peers. Social scientists wrote that the Irish had no become White. The crowning act for Irish emancipation (for Catholic emancipation in general) has undoubtedly been the election of John F. Kennedy as president of the United States. Nowadays Catholic Americans play important roles in the nation. Just a few years ago the House of Representatives elected Nancy Pelosi as Speaker of the House. She is a lady of Italian Catholic descent.

Another group that experienced exclusion for a period of time was American Jewry. Like the Irish they did not meet the social criteria imposed by the first settlers. In the first half of the 20th century the elite American universities introduced quota for Jewish applicants. If your name was Bernstein or Posner your chances for entering law or medical school became slim. Those who became lawyers and doctors faced another round of discrimination when applying for a job. Through lobbying political Washington and fighting exclusion through the court system things have changed dramatically. Today Americans of Jewish descent play important roles in the life of the nation. In academe, the media, the public sector, think tanks, the world of law and in the financial sector they hold positions of power and influence. Of all ethnic groups in the United States they are the most affluent.

Black America

Those who have knowledge of Ameri-

can history know that from the founding of America the position of Americans of African descent has been one of the defining issues in American life. When the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed all humans beings of African stock were held in slavery. They were not considered humans; they were mere goods. The country fought a civil war over this issue. It was not only a war with weapons it was a moral strife as well. A shift had taken place in the moral code of White America. Many began to see slavery as an evil institution contrary to the principles of the Christian religion. An institution that should no longer be part of the American way of life. The war was won by the abolitionists. Slavery was legally brought to an end but this did not change the way many looked upon Black Americans, especially in the southern part of the country. During the period know as the Reconstruction much was done to improve the lives of the former slaves. After some years of progress came setbacks. Discriminatory rules were introduced creating separate facilities for Black and White. Sadly the Supreme Court held these rules to be constitutional. It was not until the civil rights movement came to life in the second half of the 20th century that the lives of African Americans improved significantly. In 1954 the Supreme Court handed down the Brown v. Board of Education decision in which the separation of school children based on the color of their skin was ruled unconstitutional. This legal battle was a concerted effort of Black civic leaders and Jewish lawyers. Then came the marches and the bus boycotts under leadership of Martin Luther King. The civil rights act and the voting act were put in place to bring Black Americans more into the mainstreams of American life. Without a doubt the position of African American has improved. Nowadays everyone is accustomed to men and women of color in the sports and entertainment worlds. Names such as Tiger, Venus, Serena, Halle and Oprah are household names. In other parts of society such as the business and in the academic world progress has been made, outside the reach of the limelight. And in the political field? In city councils, in state houses and senates Black men

and women are making their mark. On the national level the Black Caucus in the House has much political clout. The principle of equality has gotten a big boost when Barack Hussein Obama conquered the ticket of the Democratic Party. For the first time in history an African American had achieved this. On 4 November 2008 he made history by becoming the 44th president of the United States thus not only administering cracks to the glass ceiling but breaking it forever. His ascent to the highest executive office in the land is a testimony of how America in a whole has changed. That Black, White, Latino and Asian Americans decided to judge the man not based on the color of his skin but the content of his character. No American young person has now an excuse why he or she can not aspire greatness. Mesmerized by the winds of change even the Republican Party decided to give equality a shot. Michael Steele, a Black attorney, was chosen to chair the party in the coming years. Can all lean back and say that America is living up to spirit of her founding documents? The answer is no. There is yet a long way to go. Not only for African Americans but also Native Americans. When will America be ready to send a Native American to the White House? ■

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